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Ambiguity or "The Eye of Mere Observation" in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

All undergraduates know that Malory's great book of chivalric ideals was apparently written by a rogue who was at leisure to write because he spent much of his time in prison for *not* living up to those ideals. Theft, attempted murder, ambush, rape . . . Malory was far too busy committing the seven deadly sins to find time to read *The Seven Types of Ambiguity*. And I am ready to wager that you were not expecting Malory's name to crop up very often at a conference devoted to ambiguity. Least of all did you imagine that he would be the subject of a plenary paper.

You may not have been reading *Le Morte Darthur* recently, but most people have memories of Malory as not exactly a complex writer. His was certainly not a complex mind. His knights and ladies inhabit a world of surface meaning, a simple world of clear-cut values, where the good are good and the bad are definitely not. There are dastardly villains and exemplary heroes, but there's nothing much in between. Very little is ever a matter of opinion, left open to interpretation, as though Malory had had uncommon success in his search for meaning, and was able to present everything in its appropriate, unambiguous category. The book, of course, is full of strange, bewildering adventures and apparently inexplicable mysteries, but once the adventures have been achieved and the inexplicable mysteries conveniently explained, meanings are usually perfectly clear, and moral significances certainly are. Malory's world is a black and white world where nothing much is ever grey, and I always think that, in this, the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley are splendidly emblematic, even though their effete aestheticism is a million away miles from *Le Morte Darthur*.[1]

The simplicity of this world without nuance explains to a large extent the divided opinion that surrounds Malory's book: *Le Morte Darthur* is far from universally admired. It has survived and been read almost continually for over five centuries and several editions of it are available today, but not

[1] Malory's perfect illustrator, I believe, would have been his Italian contemporary Paolo Uccello. The next time you turn to *Le Morte Darthur*, look at some of Uccello's battle paintings first to put you in the mood.

all teachers of literature regard it highly, not even all medievalists. Some of them, of course, regard it very highly, while others, although they are willing to accept, albeit grudgingly, that it is one of the great books of the English literary tradition, dismiss it rather hastily. Books of adventure are all well and good, but there is something insubstantial about *Le Morte Darthur*, something basically unsatisfying. To put it baldly, there is just so little intellectual depth. The soldier-scholar Sir Philip Sidney claimed that "honest King Arthur will never displease a soldier" (Sidney 1965: 127) and in so doing he perhaps characterised Malory's readership with great precision. This is a book for men of action not men of thought and, ultimately, there's something even boyish rather than manly about Malory's enthusiasms and commitments, which explains why *Le Morte Darthur* has always been one of the great books for boys – although, of course, in the nineteenth century it had to be bowdlerised first. Even then, it is the ideal book for the sort of boy who likes sports and adventure before he turns to more intellectual pursuits. And when he does, there is not much in Malory to hold on to. Consequently, in an age that values difficulty in literature and in which ambiguity is an essential element of the rich texture of a literary work, Malory seems sadly out of his depth.

We can go even further: it is not merely that subtlety and nuance do not seem to be his cup of tea, Malory seems positively to close his eyes to shades of meaning and contradictions, and even the (amusingly ironic) contradiction between the ideals he cherished and the turgid life of crime that he lived (or the life we credit him with since the biographical identification is not quite a certitude) seems not to have given him pause. We might have expected him to be the last person to want to be too categorical, just the man to encourage multiple, alternative points of view. *Au contraire*: if anything, Malory is the perfect example of the fact that books are the product of what Proust called the "l'autre moi" (Proust 1957: 137); the actual life of an author is of precious little relevance to his work. Malory the rogue might well have asked us to avoid simple-minded judgements, to give him the benefit of the doubt; but Malory the author will hear nothing of compromise, excuses or extenuating circumstances. And as for ambiguity – I am convinced that he would have had nothing to do with it. It was a word that had only recently appeared in English in the fifteenth century. "Precisely," one imagines him saying. "Newfangled, newfangled, that's what it is!"

Malory's refusal of ambiguity produces a clearsightedness – or do I mean narrowness of vision? – which is disarming for many modern readers, and which explains, I would suggest, why his book is patronised more than it is

admired. Although Lancelot is fully aware that certain members of the court are doing all they can to expose his relationship with Guenevere, he refuses none the less to cancel a night-time tryst – I shall deal with this incident again, more fully, presently; for the moment I have one point to make. When, sword in hand no less, he is on his way – alone – to keep an assignation with a married woman in her apartments at night, Malory writes "and so in his mantle that *noble* knight put himself in great jeopardy" (2. 460). The emphasis is mine but it is hardly necessary; the adjective is so astonishingly out of place because there is not the slightest analysis of the gap between intention and performance, between what Lancelot is intending to accomplish and the nobility in which the author dresses him as he sets out to accomplish it. No one asks if in circumstances like these putting oneself in jeopardy is a sign of nobility or a downright lack of common sense. There is nothing other than a face-value acceptance of a nobility that, unquestioningly, is imposed upon us, taken for granted as a given element of the story. There is no examination or querying of Lancelot's nobility, no attempt to assess it on a scale of human achievement. Perhaps fifteenth-century readers found this unenquiring commitment to goodness more palatable, whereas the centuries that have intervened have made us far more at home with a more measured honour. We can see the terrible ambiguity of Lancelot's situation and are ready to look it in the face. For Malory, it is something one should not be able to see and he sweeps it under the carpet. We have become accustomed to flawed heroes. We accept feet of clay. We no longer mind them; perhaps we have even come to expect them. Indeed, heroes who have them are all the more endearing with that common humanity that our common humanity reacts warmly to.

But Malory will have none of this and his refusal to see the ambiguities of the situation, his refusal to propose extenuating circumstances proves tiresome to many readers, who would prefer a little more authorial discrimination and less authorial tyranny. But Malory will not budge. He is not even ready to admit that the love of Lancelot and Guenevere, illicit though it might have been, was so all-consuming, so entire in its devotion that it can be excused and understood, that it can be placed in a category of its own. Of course it is in a category of its own, but he will have no truck with that word "illicit." And there is no ambiguity, just the possibility of our misreading, which it is his duty to prevent by making things perfectly explicit. If we think we have spotted an ambiguity, the possibility of an alternative interpretation, Malory puts us on the right path by simply telling us, quite unashamedly, what to think. The search for truth is by no means difficult, as long as you can see the truth when it is presented to

you. "While she lived she was a true lover," Malory says of Guenevere, "and therefore she had a good end" (2. 426). It is as simple as that.

But this verdict is far too simple for the liking of many readers, who find that Malory's unenquiring mind impoverishes a book which could have been otherwise much richer, more deeply human, if Malory had not side-stepped the complex moral issues that the narrative material brings to the fore. But that is precisely what he does, and although at one point he refers to Lancelot as "the truest lover of a sinful man" (2. 530), apparently ready to take into account a category where ambiguity might prosper – the best of the sinful – this turns out to be no more than a passing glance at a complexity with which he never comes to terms, unwilling to deal at length, we must conclude, with distinctions his readers are more than likely to misconstrue. For what other conclusion can we draw from one of the most famous passages in the book? If you have forgotten much of *Le Morte Darthur*, you have presumably not forgotten this. At least, only the slightest reminder will jog your memory. It is the incident I have already mentioned.

Events are reaching a climax and Agravain and Mordred, Arthur's wanton nephews, are determined to cause trouble by revealing the adulterous nature of the relationship between Lancelot and the Queen. Imprudently, the lovers arrange to meet at night in the Queen's apartments and the troublemakers turn up banging on the door convinced they now have the indisputable evidence they were looking for: Lancelot and Guenevere caught *in flagrante delicto* in bed together. But there's a snag: they cannot gain entrance to the room to take the lovers in adultery; there is no evidence, and to prevent us from aligning ourselves with the troublemakers and sharing their suspicions Malory writes, "and whether they were abed or at other manner of disports, me list not hereof make no mention, for love that time was not as love is nowadays" (2. 460). My goodness! What do we have here? Could this be a touch of ambiguity after all? Right at the climax of the book. What can Malory be thinking about? Have we been too hasty in saying that his knights inhabit an unambiguous world?

Perhaps we have, for Malory certainly does not choose clarity here. Indeed, he positively draws our attention to a question that cries out to be asked, and then refuses to answer it. Withholding information is not ambiguity; what is ambiguous is that we know the answer to the question – Malory has given us too much information already – but he wants that answer to be capable of an alternative interpretation.

We might wonder what was there to stop him from saying that the lovers were *not* in bed together – since he is so obviously convinced of the honourable

nature of their love? Perhaps, as a serious historian Malory feels that he cannot distort the truth since his French source text (Frappier 1964: 143, §90) states clearly that the lovers were, indeed, in bed (what else would you expect of a French book after all?). Except that Malory modifies his French book elsewhere when it suits his purpose and is ready to claim that it corroborates what he is saying when it certainly does not. There was no *a priori* reason why he could not edit his material here, in line with his own moral standards.

Perhaps we should argue that the source material – the history of Arthur – was too well known for Malory to tamper with it, especially over such a crucial detail. And perhaps that is true although I am not so sure. Malory was, after all, producing an English version of the story because little or nothing was available – or widely available in English, and since his "translation" was fulfilling a real need, we can hardly claim that the French texts had made the story so well-known since very few people in fifteenth century England would have been able to read them.

But I believe that Malory makes no attempt to cover up the truth – indeed he draws attention to it by withholding the information – because he saw no need. The devotion of the lovers in his eyes was entirely honourable and the precise details of the private relationship were matters that did not concern the court historian or the court. Malory's attitude of perfect loyalty makes him overlook or fail to see accessory details that might cheapen and misrepresent something entirely fine. For the ability to see other meanings, the perception of ambiguities, is part and parcel not of a richness of meaning and a depth of perception; in *the Morte Darthur* it is a symptom of a poverty of spirit, a merely objective point of view that dissects without discernment, and which has lost sight of all that is of value in the world. And Malory categorically refuses to look with what we might call the "eye of mere observation."

My quotation, you have guessed, comes from an entirely different work of literature, but the point being made, I believe, is precisely the same. It is another night-time episode that must be hidden from the eyes of those who will not understand. Tess has stolen back to the graveyard to leave a home-made cross and a few flowers on the grave of her dead baby: "What matter was it that on the outside of the jar the eye of mere observation noted the words 'Keelwell's marmalade'? The eye of maternal affection did not see them in its vision of higher things" (Hardy 1957: 125).

"The eye of mere observation" sees that grave for what it is: a little bastard's grave. And the eye of mere observation is right. But at the same time so desperately wrong. A sin has been exposed and duly labelled if you must; but

so has the blackness of society's heart, which is grudging, barren, mean-spirited and cold. Of course, the letter of the law is on society's side, but we don't need telling: the letter killeth.

Malory could have made the lovers blameless and robbed the villains of all evidence, but he had no need to do so. In his eyes Lancelot and the Queen are innocent (just as Tess is, indeed, a "pure woman"[2]), and the real evil lies in the interpretation of the troublemakers, bent on destruction, but with nothing more than ambiguity to use as a weapon. Singleness of purpose and of vision is Malory's ideal; the knowing look of those who see multiple meanings is, ultimately, distorted and – what could be worse? – destructive.

And so rather than claim that Malory creates an unambiguous world of surface meaning, perhaps we could consider the matter from another point of view, perhaps we could suggest that he integrates ambiguity into his material because he regularly associates it with evil. It is the ill-intentioned, ill-thinking characters who seek to destroy who can see alternative interpretations only too clearly, while those who are truly devoted and loyal to the Arthurian ideal see, not with blinkered eyes – that would be the enemy point of view – but with eyes that are single-mindedly and finely focused on that truth which is the "hyeste thyng that man may kepe," as another fine knight said in other circumstances (Chaucer 1957: 143).

But here I would like to examine one well-known example in greater detail to see how Malory exploits the ambiguities of a situation in which, once again, Lancelot and the Queen find themselves in danger. It is the episode in which Guenevere is lodged with her wounded knights at Meliagaunt's castle when Lancelot comes to rescue her (2. 425–446) and it is of particular significance, I believe, in that Malory has taken the incident out of its original context. In the French sources it is one of the early incidents of the Arthurian kingdom and is part of the *Lancelot en prose*, the third branch of the Vulgate cycle. Malory gives the voluminous *Lancelot en prose* rather short shrift – the gushing, lachrymose Lancelot of the early books was not his kind of hero, a bit too much of a French sissy for his taste I suspect – but he retains this episode, which he fits into the very end of his history, making it the second of a series of three incidents from which Guenevere needs to be rescued.

You recall what has happened here. Meliagaunt has kidnapped the Queen (in the absence of Lancelot of course) while she was out Maying with her personal bodyguard of ten knights, who, though considerably outnumbered,

[2] The novel's subtitle, of course.

fight bravely to defend her. They are severely wounded and the Queen gives in to Meliagaunt to save her knights, from whom she refuses to be separated. They are to be lodged in her chambers, she insists. Meanwhile, Lancelot has been informed of the events and, having escaped the ambush which had been set for him, arrives at the castle. Meliagaunt – we hardly need telling – has cravenly asked for the Queen to intervene on his behalf and Lancelot, itching for a fight, is somewhat irritated to learn that the Queen has negotiated terms, until she reassures him: "I accorded never unto him for favour nor love that I had unto him, but for to lay down every shameful noise" (2. 435). She is aware that they live in a world where people are constantly seeking to misread the evidence. "Madam . . . so ye be pleased I care not, as for my part ye shall soon please" (2. 436) says Lancelot cryptically, in preparation for the second part of the story, which is what interests me here.

The lovers arrange to meet at night and Lancelot climbs up to Guenevere's window with the aid of a ladder he had spotted earlier. Unfortunately, iron bars protect the window, but the lovers are so keen to spend time together that Lancelot puts his strength to the test "for [Guenevere's] love" and pulls the bars "clean out of the stone walls" (2. 438), cutting his arm to the bone in the process. Like the ideal lover he is, he pays no attention to a mere scratch of the sort, even when it bleeds profusely, but he "went unto bed with the queen" (2. 438) – Malory tells us plainly this time, since the ambiguity will be elsewhere:

> and he took no force of his hurt hand, but took his pleasance and his liking until it was the dawning of the day; and wit you well he slept not but watched, and when he saw his time that he might tarry no longer he took his leave and departed at the window, and put it together as well as he might again. (2. 438)

Since they all sleep unusually late, Meliagaunt comes to wake the Queen and, seeing her bed stained with blood, interprets the evidence according to the workings of his own devious mind: the queen has obviously shared her bed with her wounded knights, or some of them, or at the very least one of them – Meliagaunt is almost overwhelmed by the number of possible accusations. After all, why else did she make such a point of keeping them with her? What a godsend for the caddish Meliagaunt, who can now hope to be upstaged in treachery by the queen herself.

The accusation is, of course, preposterous and the wounded knights deny it vigorously. Who but a bounder like Meliagaunt could even imagine that "this most noble Christian Queen" (2. 461), could possibly betray her husband in such a disgraceful manner? But Meliagaunt is so sure that he has read the

incriminating signs correctly that he remains blind to all the clues to which Malory has drawn our attention. He never dreams of asking where the blood-stains come from if one of the wounded knights has *not* shared the queen's bed, and Malory interestingly ignores the logical explanation that is offered in a similar incident in one of the French sources – that the lady has had a nose bleed during the night. But, as we might expect, ladies in French texts are far more worldly and are expert in the art of pooh-poohing accusations of adultery; Malory's Queen is far too honest to lie, just as she is far too virtuous to sleep with one of her wounded knights. And when they all deny the charges, Meliagaunt never thinks to ask if any other knights have been injured recently. He never notices the makeshift repair job on the broken window, and most of all he never notices the most telling detail, to which Malory is careful to draw our attention.

When Lancelot had returned to his chambers, his friend Sir Lavayne had "dressed his hand and staunched it, and put upon it a glove, that it should not be espied" (2. 438). When he arrives on the scene of the accusation no one pays the slightest attention to the glove, no one asks why he has suddenly started wearing one. And when Meliagaunt finally challenges Lancelot to combat to prove the Queen's honour, he says "here is my glove that [the Queen] is a traitress to my lord, King Arthur." Lancelot certainly does not throw down his own glove in defiance (how could he, of course), but merely replies, a tad tamely: "Well, sir, and I receive your glove" (2. 440).

I have had to leave out a lot of the incident but perhaps I ought to add that the insistence on gloves stands out in particular for the simple reason that there are almost no other gloves (or gauntlets) elsewhere in Malory. In this world of knightly challenges, one might have expected gloves to be flying and that Camelot would be the centre of a flourishing glove trade. But that is by no means the case. All but two of the references to gloves in *Le Morte Darthur* are to be found in this passage, as are the two unique references to gauntlets. Gloves and hands are mentioned frequently. When Meliagaunt asks the Queen for mercy, he does so with the words "I would no more . . . but that ye would take all in your own *hands*" (2. 435–5, italics mine), and she explains the situation to Lancelot in precisely the same terms: "for all thing is put in my *hand*" (2. 435, italics mine). Lancelot accepts somewhat grudgingly but they withdraw reconciled and "right so the queen took Sir Lancelot by the bare *hand*, for he had put off his gauntlet" (2. 436, italics mine). It is a rare moment of intensely felt physical contact at the opening of an incident in which it will not be possible for Lancelot's hand to remain bare.

The episode as a whole, apparently chosen specifically for this place in the story, appears particularly strange. Malory seems to flaunt the possibility of alternative interpretations, laying clues and leaving them entirely unseen in order to emphasise a singleness of vision which, throughout the book, is his ideal. From the point of view of straightforward realism, the incident is preposterous. Miss Marple would have made mincemeat of them all. But if the clues remain unseen, that is because in an ideal world, there would be nothing to see. And after all, there is no evidence to corroborate the infidelity of the Queen because, quite simply and unambiguously, the Queen is innocent of the charges. As Malory took the time to remind us just before the kidnapping, in an evocation of the month of May: the Queen was a true lover and therefore had a good end. It was a reminder designed to prepare us for the events to come, which take place, of course, while the Queen is out Maying.

But it is with this devotion to the unsoiled virtue of the Queen, which looks too much like a determination to whitewash a tarnished reputation, that so many modern readers give up on Malory. If this is an example of the depth of his thought, and his ability to handle complex and contradictory human emotions and loyalties, we are singularly unimpressed. This is simply having your cake and eating it; there's nothing more to it than that. Admittedly, his adventures (in small doses) are agreeable and exciting; he creates a world of chivalry and mystery that has delighted generations, even centuries of readers. But it would be wiser not to try for an intellectual defence of Malory's book when surface meanings remain the ideal. And yet I wonder if we should not turn the question around and say that Malory's *Morte Darthur* is a salutary reminder that a literary reputation can survive, and indeed flourish, without the richness that complexity can bring. In other words, ambiguity in literature is no doubt a good thing, but you can have too much of a good thing – as doctors, dieticians (and other killjoys) frequently remind us. Perhaps literary specialists, and admirers of Malory, in particular, should try saying the same thing.

When a single-minded clarity of vision is preferred over the ability to see alternative interpretations, this amounts to a rejection of perceptiveness in favour of commitment, a preference for goodness rather than cleverness, and inevitably it draws attention to a book's lack of complex thought. No doubt *Le Morte Darthur* would have been more intellectually satisfying if Malory had analysed rather than imposed, if he had not done our thinking for us, as though we were likely to misunderstand. On the other hand, it is the unambiguous commitment to goodness that is the basis of the book's massive appeal to our most basic and powerful sentiments. *Le Morte Darthur* is a joyous, noble,

uplifting book which does not ask us to think or reason, but, in a way, to commit ourselves, to join in with its values and enthusiasms, almost to believe and have faith. We are not required to examine evidence and sift ambiguities, we are called upon to accept and endorse. I would have been tempted to say that the response required is quasi-religious if Malory had not shown such a luke-warm attitude to religion: Nathaniel Baxter in the Dedicatory Epistle to his translation of Calvin's sermons (1577) condemned his book as "vile & blasphemous" with its "vile and stinking story of the Sangreall" (qtd. in Parins 1988: 59), but who on earth would have thought of making that accusation other than the strident puritan who made it.

I am not saying that Malory's knights are ungodly but they are not enthusiasts. Nor are they philosophers or men of theory. They do not say much although they speak to the purpose when they have to. But eloquence, like ambiguity, is not seen as a virtue, and they are not overly given to thought. Or rather, they do not think deeply but they think justly on all important matters and prefer to put into action a code of conduct which they honour to the full. They may not be clever but they are good.

This contrast between goodness and cleverness is something two American writers have drawn much attention to and in so doing have offered an interesting approach to Malory's book. I am speaking of John Steinbeck, who singles out the two words I am using, and, before him, Mark Twain, who used Malory's "novel" – "the first and one of the greatest novels in the English language" according to Steinbeck (1982: 304) – for one of his own.

Inevitably, Malory's refusal of ambiguity and his devotion to face values made him an easy prey to the wit of Mark Twain, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is a witty book, even if many of the jokes have worn thin. Twain's Yankee wakes up in this world of surface meaning and soon catches the same disease. When told that a young man is a page he replies "Go 'long ... you aint more than a paragraph" (Twain 1982: 15), and the accumulation of jokes with old words and obsolete meanings soon becomes tiresome. But the basic situation of the clash of cultures is more productive and this enterprising, worldly-wise Yankee who finds himself in a world of surface meaning discovers an Arthurian kingdom peopled with simpletons, "big boobies" (Twain 1982: 20) entirely unaware of what an ambiguity might be, "animals" who "didn't reason," who "never put this and that together," indeed, "all their talk showed that they didn't know a discrepancy when they saw it" (Twain 1982: 29). They are even ready to believe the literal truth of the extravagant adventures they relate – at inordinate length – to each other. The

Yankee, with his "eye of mere observation," of course, recognises them at once as "lies." It goes without saying that, in a flash, he spots the adultery that lurks in Guenevere's heart, even though she, poor soul, is too innocent to realise. "It was touching," he points out "to see the queen blush and smile, and look embarrassed and happy, and fling furtive glances at Sir Launcelot that would have got him shot in Arkansas" (Twain 1982: 21). That she might, indeed, be innocent never occurs to his corrupt mind, and with his superior knowledge he soon realises the extent to which he can profit in this world of big children; "a superior man like me ought to be shrewd enough to contrive some way to take advantage" (Twain 1982: 28), he declares complacently. The people need a "new deal," he says, coining the phrase Roosevelt was to borrow in 1932 (Twain 1982: 68), but it is "advantage" that always comes first. Inevitably, he dismisses the Quest of the Holy Grail for its lack of commercial interest; "there was worlds [sic] of reputation in it, but no money" (Twain 1982: 49). He delights in the ease with which he can assume power, as he casts his mercantile gaze – the word "market" regularly crops up – over the kingdom. He is a man who knows what things cost but not what they are worth, his assessment of himself does nothing to win our admiration: he sees himself as "a giant among pigmies, a man among children, a master intelligence among intellectual moles" (Twain 1982: 43). All we can say in his defence is that in his patronising remarks about the simpletons who inhabit Arthur's world he betrays, *malgré lui*, an admiration that is – one must admit – to his credit: "they were a childlike and innocent lot; telling lies of the stateliest pattern with a most gentle and winning naivety, and ready and willing to listen to anybody else's lie, and believe it too" (Twain 1982: 19). They may be brainless – and the Yankee is very much aware of his own brains and makes a point of recruiting "the brightest young minds" he could find (Twain 1982: 50) – "Yet there was something very engaging about these great simple-hearted creatures, something attractive and loveable," and in spite of all his belittling criticisms "there was a fine manliness observable in almost every face; and in some a certain loftiness and sweetness that rebuked your belittling criticisms and stilled them" (Twain 1982: 20).

Twain mocks Malory's world with much relish but in many ways his parody is a patent tribute to the great book. He pokes fun at the literalness of this unambiguous world and we see the risk Malory was taking in rejecting discernment in favour of virtue. His characters are clearly focused on ideals and risk appearing merely blinkered and unseeing. When the ideal knight is the strong silent type, as all of Malory's knights are – "he sayeth little and he doth much more" (1. 124) – when they are prodigal in deeds but sparing with words,

they may give the impression that they have nothing to say for themselves and are empty-headed. Twain gives expression to criticisms that can genuinely be be made, but at the same time he never fails to emphasise the great appeal of that simple goodness, which was as unfashionable a virtue for a nineteenth century Yankee as it is these days.

When an author makes his heroes good, he must be ready to stifle a yawn. The Connecticut Yankee, for all his cleverness, is certainly not what you might call good, and it is a consummate irony, of course, that Twain chose for his hero such an appropriate name. In the title of the book he is the Yankee, and in the narrative itself he quickly establishes himself as "the boss." Twain only rarely uses his actual name as such, but he does have one. His Christian name, Hank, is splendidly American, of course – I have never met an Englishman called Hank – and his surname, Welsh in origin, fits quite well with his New England origins. But it also fits even better – and tellingly so – into *Le Morte Darthur*. His name, you recall, is Morgan, the name of Malory's arch villain, who was very, very clever, but far from good.

Clever, good . . . these simple words, as I said, have been borrowed from Steinbeck and it is with a few remarks that Steinbeck made in private letters that I wish to conclude. Steinbeck's own Arthurian adventure remained unfinished and I, for one, can never quite work out what he was trying to achieve or whether he had even made up his mind about what he was trying to achieve. Did he merely want to modernise Malory's language or was he planning to rework Malory's book as Malory himself had reworked his sources? The text that he left behind is difficult to classify but during the years he was working on the project he wrote letters which are very revealing of the enormous admiration he had for *Le Morte Darthur*, which, he described as "the story of [Malory's] dreams of goodness" (Steinbeck 1982: 305).

The remarks I want to quote – and they seem to have been written with quotation in mind – throw a helpful light on Malory's book and the knights who people its pages. "It is the nature of the hero to be a fool," says Steinbeck, certainly not mincing his words, and with an American twang he adds, "Only the bad guys can be smart" (Steinbeck 1982: 350). "Cleverness," he believed, "equates with evil almost invariably," and, using an expression reminiscent of Twain's vision of the Arthurian kingdom, he describes the *Morte Darthur* as "the yearning for the childlike simplicity of a time when the great were not clever" (Steinbeck 1982: 351).

This, it seems to me, hits the Malorian nail on the head. The world he creates (or recreates, since the narrative material was not his own) seems simplistic and

is an easy target for the Twains (and the Monty Pythons) of this world. It certainly does not offer a complex analysis of the Arthurian kingdom in its determination to focus on clearly defined virtues and in its refusal either to take stock of contradictions and ambiguities or argue them out. If the evidence contradicts deeply held beliefs, it is the evidence that must be explained away not the deeply held beliefs that must be questioned, in the way that Edmund Gosse's father, a leading marine biologist but also a devout Plymouth brother, pointed out that God put the fossils into creation ready-made, because he really had created the world in 4004 BC, whatever those fossils might – with their evil ambiguity – suggest.

We are too sophisticated for this sort of thing today, no doubt, and therefore we should not take too much of a desire for sophisticated reasoning to Malory's book. Instead, we should respond to that hankering after virtue not cleverness among the great of the world, for that is what Malory's book is all about: the importance of goodness in high places. We live in a world where statesmen are expected to be clever and we have given up on goodness. We have learnt to live without it. Virtue seems to count for little – or should I say nothing – among our rulers these days, and where corruption is not rife, self-interest certainly is. Self-interest or an expert use of expense accounts, not to mention all those fabulous fees for after dinner speeches. It's all legal of course, oh yes, it's all legal, but it is cleverly, very cleverly, calculated too. Certainly sexual virtue in high places has become an irrelevance, but that, perhaps, is a good thing. Gone are the days – but only in living memory – when a divorced person could not be received at the English court although I am told that a President of the French Republic recently had to marry in haste in order to avoid having to sleep alone at Windsor castle.

When we turn to the unambiguous world of *Le Morte Darthur*, to those days when goodness and political power went hand in hand (or do I mean hand in glove?), we look back with nostalgia and regret for what today cannot be. But what am I saying? The regret as we look back is not regret in comparison with what is not true *now*, but with what was not true even *then*. For Malory's book is a tragedy and a profoundly pessimistic book. *Le Morte Darthur* is not about the importance of goodness in high places. Oh no. In his search for meaning, Malory learnt only too well the unambiguous truth. *Le Morte Darthur* is about the *impossibility* of goodness in high places. And there are no two opinions about that.

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